

FORGERY AND FAKES

A discussion of the philosophical implications of 'perfect fakes' in painting

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A 'perfect forgery' is by definition a production or reproduction indistinguishable from the original. This definition makes certain assumptions: that it is normally and in principle possible, in cases where paintings are attributed to a particular painter, to establish historically that they either did or did not so originate; that it is possible that two works, one original and one a forgery, are visually indistinguishable; that some works, e.g. a painting, are 'one-off,' i.e. cannot have multiple instances; that the original is of the greatest value.

It also makes the more general assumption, questioned by Ayer (LTL., pp. 113-4, CQP., pp. 24-5), that statements about aesthetic values are meaningful. On Ayer's account historical claims contrast with aesthetic claims. The latter are expressions of emotion, attempts to communicate emotion. For Ayer there is no logical relation between the two types of claim. 'This picture is by Vermeer' (an historical claim) is meaningful and may be true. 'This picture is aesthetically worthy' (a purported aesthetic claim) is meaningless, i.e. can be neither true nor false. This will prove to be an important issue (although not to be discussed in the terms of Ayer's viewpoint): Is forgery an aesthetic or a historical concept, or possibly, both?

There are two types of forgery: production of most exact copies, and imitations, paintings in the style of (a particular artist). The weak notion of forgery holds that only if the distinction between original and forgery is significant shall we speak of the work as autographic. (Cf. Goodman, in Dutton (ed.), p. 103). A stronger notion of forgery entails that the forger can rival the original artist in invention as well as in execution, can produce as good a work rather than an identical copy. If the latter were the case, Wollheim suggests, we should very considerably have to downgrade our views both of the original artist, assuming that he is great, and of art (Cf. Wollheim, p. 197). Why? A related objection relies upon historical considerations, namely that forgery misrepresents achievement as well as origin. Dutton combines this with the ethical objection and speaks of the forger's 'crimes,' The achievement of an artist consists in his producing works of art at a particular time and place in the history of art. The forger in misrepresenting origins misrepresents the achievement of the artist. When we learn that what we thought was an original seventeenth century work is a product of a forger in the twentieth, the work of art is no longer the same object. Such misrepresentation of artistic performance destroys the very conception of art. I shall ask later what is meant by "same object." At this stage I make three observations. First, forgeries are significant only when the work forged is considered significant. No-one is interested in the forgery of an ephemeral cartoon. So forgery is, in its own way, a testimony to the achievement of the original work of art and of artist. Secondly, the history of forgery is part of the history of art. So the successful forger of the acknowledged and authentic works will be significant. The history of forgery has shown that critics are very fallible, and at least in some cases when they were taken in, should have known a lot better. Their authority is then in doubt. Third, a forgery may have influence in the history of art by significantly influencing later artists and movements, not simply by showing up pretentious critics. A case in point is that of the literary forgery which 'did more than any single work to bring about the romantic

movement in European, and especially in German, literature. . . . ' namely James Macpherson's Works of Ossian. The work has originality in that it explores a new style and influences a movement in literary history. How could the recognition of it as a forgery and of its influence undermine art?

Paintings are unique physical objects and have unique qualities. So, forgery with respect to paintings can take two forms: the reproduction, or multiple production of copies, of the original work, and the production of works in the style of the original painting or painter. Does production in either way undermine the uniqueness of the original and distort our conception and evaluation of art? (Cf. Hanfling, in Hanfling (ed.), p. 98).

Further questions arise. (1) Is it rational to prefer and more highly value original works? (2) How shall we conceive the relation between the authentic original and the forgery? Specifically (3) Should the fact that A is original and B a forgery make a difference to an aesthetic judgment about the paintings? That it frequently does is not in doubt. So what?

The concept of forgery is historical. I shall argue that the concept of aesthetic value is not, and hence aesthetic value is independent of historical knowledge.

Forgery, like originality, assumes that there is development in art. The notion of forgery depends upon the notion of originality. The issue here is quite simple. Should use of the term 'aesthetic' include or exclude historical knowledge and considerations? Is an aesthetic judgment possible without historical knowledge? To claim that 'aesthetically it makes no difference whether a work is authentic or a forgery' (Lessing, in Dutton (ed.), p. 76), is to hold that historical considerations are irrelevant (the position both of Clive Bell (vide infra and Lessing). I hold that forgery is important historically but not aesthetically.

An historical question is settled by appeal to evidence. The following are historical questions: Did X paint P at time T? Does culture C value O etc.? Did work of art W sell for so and so much? Did critics R1 and R2 distinguish between genuine and fake? In the presence of work of art W, what does subject S feel? Did curators remove paintings X and Y when they learned of their origin? The term 'historical' comprehends such psychological and economic matters.

An aesthetic question is not so settled. The thesis that the aesthetic is autonomous, sometimes labelled 'reductionist,' is that anything other than physical, visible differences are irrelevant to aesthetic appreciation of paintings. We should restrict attention to the internal characteristics of paintings. What is visually indiscernible is irrelevant for aesthetic appreciation. The position can be very clearly stated in the context of the concept of the perfect forgery. Copies and originals, if visually indistinguishable, are aesthetically identical. Two objects that do not differ in any observable qualities cannot differ in aesthetic value. (For a clear statement of the thesis, see Radford, 69-72).

The arguments sometimes offered against this position, and apparently for the view that a painting should look different if and after one discovers it is a fake, seem to me to have a strange

irrelevance to the issue, strange in that they consist in deductions from psychological observations. For example (cf. Radford, 74):

- (1) If one feels differently the painting looks different.
- (2) Such 'looking different' is not an illusion.
- (3) Feeling different is a proper response to change of belief and to acquisition of knowledge, that is to say, is a legitimate and justifiable psychological response.
- (4) We are constituted in such a way that how things look is not simply a function of physical factors.

From these premises, the conclusion is then drawn:

- (5) Therefore forgeries as works are different from originals,

and will be seen as such.

Radford makes a logical jump in (5), claiming an objective assertion i.e. about the work, not about the subject, whereas in (1) to (4) he has provided only psychological descriptions. A case of projection? Such psychological observations, even if insufficient to sustain the conclusion, are interesting, since they remind us of well-established facts about peoples' experience of works of art. People learn facts not having to do with the appearance of the work of art, thinking that they do. People claim to perceive differently identical qualities of a work of art when they acquire historical and other types of information.

To establish the historical fact that Rembrandt, Vermeer, Picasso or Van Meegeren produced the painting does not ipso facto establish it to be aesthetically meritorious (or otherwise). That judgment must be made on other than historical grounds. 'Original,' 'authentic' do not mean 'good.' It is likely that an original is better than a forgery. But it is possible that a copy is as good as, even better than, an original. In each individual case, the judgment will be made on other than historical grounds, however the viewer feels about the work of art, before and after he learns the facts about its history. One cannot see that a work is original. If I come to learn that it is, and my attitude to it changes, I will not be able to appeal to what I see, if I want to justify my change of attitude. What changes is not the aesthetic value of the painting, nor my aesthetic attitude.

In sum, the aesthetic attitude is 'a wholly autonomous one' (Lessing in Dutton (ed.), p. 76), to which historical considerations and context are not relevant. So, the fact of forgery is not important aesthetically even if it is historically, biographically and economically. As should be clear, my use of the term 'historical' includes these other meanings. For the sake of a definition of the aesthetic we may ignore such considerations.

Wollheim's fundamental objection to this thesis of the autonomy of the aesthetic is that it presupposes 'an unduly atomistic conception of criticism' (Wollheim, p. 198). He means that it leads us to exclusive concentration on one particular painting after another: this one, that one, the other, with no 'and' in between, as it were. But in criticism there are two procedures: concentration on the particular and the building up of an overall picture (sic) of art. The latter process involves relating individual works of art to other works 'and to art itself.' (p. 199). His objection is not that the consideration of the individual work is wrong (in fact it is essential) but that it is not sufficient (possible?) in isolation from the wider synthetic process. But he admits that there might be concepts which enable us to organise our experience but have no influence on our perception of individual works of art, such concepts as 'originality,' 'autograph,' 'forgery.' To this statement we may compare Radford's objection to his own theory: '. . . some information about works of art is irrelevant to their standing as works of art.' Such statements are sufficient encouragement to examine these concepts, and at the same time maintain that they are irrelevant to aesthetic judgment.

Like forgery originality is also an historical concept, essential to the concept of forgery. Recognition of the autonomy of the aesthetic entails that consideration of the immediately perceptible qualities of a painting, and of nothing more, is sufficient for the making of an aesthetic judgment about it. A justifiable difference in aesthetic attitude toward two paintings will always be able to appeal to a visually discernible difference between them. It is thus of fundamental importance to note two ways of establishing difference. The first is the visual. I look, see and note a difference. The second is the historical: the tracing of this and that painting to their origins by means of evidence available. The examination of the evidence may demonstrate that two visually identical paintings have different origins. Two numerically non-identical paintings, shown to be entities having different origins, may be qualitatively identical, shown to be such by looking at them. In such a case they are aesthetically identical. I believe that the idea of visual examination is serviceable, in spite of Goodman's observations.

Opponents of the 'reductionist' view maintain that there may be indiscernible features which enable us to distinguish the genuine painting from the forgery, i.e. that what is indiscernible visually is of aesthetic significance. This view insists on what I am denying, that the concept of originality is indispensable to that of aesthetic judgment, that historical judgments are aesthetic judgments, that aesthetic judgment depends upon interpretation (which may not be evident to the viewer, since participation in the culture may obscure his possession of such necessary knowledge.) What is clear is that it will not do simply to appeal to the fact that we value originality highly, as if this psychological observation were decisive.

Goodman argues that we must allow it to be an open question whether historical knowledge may not in the future make discernment of difference possible between what now appear to be two identical pictures. If the viewer has a change of attitude he will be capable of seeing aspects he did not and was not able to see before. It is a matter of how one sees as well as a matter of seeing what is to be seen. Two people may see all there is to be seen in the painting and yet see differently (Shade's of Hare's 'blik'). So, Goodman never considers forgery 'perfect.' However, the brief of this essay is to begin with the concept, of the perfect forgery, which he excludes, as 'super-hypothetical' (Goodman, in Dutton (ed.), pp. 96-99).

Let us say, I take account of everything there is to see in a picture. I may see the diagram, sometimes taken as a paradigm, now as a duck, now as a rabbit. Nothing visible changes. No extra information intervenes between the change from the one seeing (i.e. 'seeing-as') to the other. The aesthetic case is different. We are asked to believe that extraneous information influences how we see the painting, so that we see the identical painting differently, and that the difference is an aesthetic one. We can accept the psychological observation. People do so 'see' paintings differently. There is no need to deny that to reject the interpretation placed upon it, namely that the difference is an aesthetic difference. Koestler makes the point well. Originality value is often relic value. Such valuation has nothing to do with aesthetic judgment. Types of judgment are often confused in the mind of the viewer, particularly if viewer is owner with an economic interest in the work. We could debate whether we should call it snobbery to give new pride of place to a work after having learnt facts about its origin. Hoi polloi are not alone in taking this confused and inconsistent attitude. One writer on aesthetics quite deliberately admits, 'Our belief in the creative power of the great artist has about it an aura of primitive magic. His work of art is a kind of talisman, a fetish

. . . . Once a work is known to be a forgery, the magic is gone.' (Meyer, in Dutton (ed.), pp. 86,87). A psychological description of such a phenomenon (peoples' valuing originality) does not constitute a philosophical defence of such evaluation. Sometimes the irrationality is patent: paying of inflated prices for (purported) originals; downgrading of non-original works of equal aesthetic value, often standard gallery practice.

Bell's view is a protest. What defines the aesthetics of the painting is its 'significant form.' This evokes aesthetic response. Absence of aesthetic attitude is evidence of lack of significant form. Bell also held that a forgery was inferior to the original. He insisted on significant form as defining the aesthetic and also on differentiating between the aesthetic value of the original and that of the forgery. In the case of the perfect forgery, these are visually identical and there is no way these two assumptions can be held together. He argued that we are justified in feeling different about the fake because it is different. The artist was of a different mental set from the forger. So the forgery is different. So our different attitude to the forgery is justified. The mental capacity, set and attitude of the painter is manifest in the painting. Bell's assertion that there is such a difference is an inference, which he sets forth as an a priori claim (cf. Radford, 68-69). So also is his claim that the differences stem from the different mental states of original painter and forger.

The problem of originality is complex.

(1) The concept has various meanings: e.g. distinctness or particularity; individuality; imaginative novelty; unique artistic achievement, whether of one painting, or of an artist, or a 'school' of art. In none of these cases can we judge a painting original simply by inspecting it visually. That P is original is an historical judgment. As such it has no relevance to aesthetic judgment.

(2) A painting is complex in the sense that originality is one aspect of a totality. We must distinguish 'total value' from 'originality value' and 'aesthetic value.' In particular we must beware of the argument implicit in popular attitudes, and often in gallery practice. If originality is valued highly, and W work of art is original, its originality is relevant to its success as a work of art. To overemphasize the importance of originality in our appreciation of a work of art would be to commit a category mistake. Creative vision is not only expressed once when the artist's creation first becomes public, but also whenever anyone views the painting later. The term 'originality' is appropriate to both occasions. Moreover, an exact copy expresses the identical vision, whether made by the same artist or by someone else, and only in the latter case would we call it a forgery.

(3) We should distinguish creativity and originality, use the former of the artist and the latter of the work of art. Creativity, unlike technique cannot be learnt.

(4) The ethical question need not detain us. It is raised in the context of the perfect forgery in that the forger lets it be understood that the work he has produced is by a recognized painter (other than himself) and people believe the misidentification of the painting. So he has practised successful deception. (It would not be called 'forgery' if he passed off the work of another artist as his own). His dupes value it more highly than they otherwise would, claiming for it other than 'originality value.' When made aware of its actual origin, they take a different attitude to it, now denigrating it, by removing it to the basement in a gallery, or even by destroying it. The reverse also happens, as in Koestler's case of Catherine, who moved the sketch which she learned was an original Picasso to a place of honour in her house. In the case of the perfect fake, the copyist's or imitator's work is identical with the original and so has the same aesthetic value. So the 'ethical problem' can be isolated from, since it is irrelevant to that of the assessment of aesthetic merit. While deceived as to origin, they need not have been deceived as to its aesthetic worth. There was no rational basis for a change of mind here.

(5) It has been held that all works of art are necessarily unique, that it is a temptation to say that 'judgments that refer essentially to the genesis, the historical background of a work, are not aesthetic judgments at all' (Cf. Wilkerson, 303,308). This entails that to the question, 'Is what you see different or not?' when presented with two visually indistinguishable paintings, two different answers may be given: 'No,' visually; 'Yes,' aesthetically. Prima facie that sounds implausible, trading as it does on the ambiguity of the word 'see.' It appears to be an example of over-emphasis of the concept of originality earlier noted, which simply asserts the fact that in our culture we place a high value on originality.

No demonstrations are forthcoming. The art world is divided in its opinions and practice and in reference to our problem employs different criteria of aesthetic judgment. On the one hand, appearance is all that counts. On the other, the origin of the painting counts when making a judgment concerning aesthetic value. The attraction of the institutional theory of art is that it appears to give a definition of the aesthetic but studiously avoids doing so, instead providing an account of the practice of the art world. In that way it avoids pronouncing on the questions with which we are here concerned.

Take an analogy. What the exam paper did not say was that marks would be given for originality, exemplified in ideas which had their source in the writer. So we assume that they would not, but interpret this in a particular way. Two students worked together to prepare for the exam. A is creative, but does not have a good memory. B is of excellent memory but with very little creativity. A has forgotten the discussion, but in the exam recreates the

answers along the lines they had talked. B recalls word for word the discussions and reproduces them, not always understanding what he writes. There was no possible collusion during the exam. Each produced identical answers. So each got identical marks, there being no reward for originality (i.e. being the primary source of the answer). The rules of the game called 'examination' do not recognize B's writing as inauthentic, and so of less value than A's, even if an astute examiner might guess or discern what had happened. Only if it should be included in the rules that, to determine what a good answer is, he must consider genetic questions, would the examiner qua examiner take any interest in such. In this case the rules of the game are clear. In the case of art different rules can be extrapolated from different practices. From one: Consider the question of its origin as part of the process of the aesthetic evaluation of the painting. From the other: Look only at the visibly discernible painting. Such disagreement is left to stand in the art world. Should we try to resolve it?

The answer depends upon the assessment we make of the function in aesthetics of reason and of rational justification. Since it is not possible to give demonstrations of aesthetic value, reasoning is explanatory rather than justificatory. Such reasoning takes place within the context of accepted conventions, in which context there may or may not be unanimity. Where conventions differ, we have to choose. If aesthetic discussion is for the sake of enabling us to look and see, of inviting us to appreciate what is there to be appreciated, we shall be able to see and make aesthetic judgments without knowledge of this or that particular tradition. The crucial question is then, Does talk awake and direct our perception? If it draws attention to what is there in the picture to be seen, the answer is affirmative. (Cf. Lyas, in *Hanfling*, pp. 366-7, where significantly there is no discussion of establishing origins, but only of aesthetic talk as means of enabling us to see what is there to be seen in the painting). It does not matter aesthetically what the historical status of the painting before us is, it does not matter whether the historical question is settled, or can be settled. The curators at Nottingham Castle Museum are right then in displaying 'Susannah and the Elders,' while noting: 'There is some debate as to whether this painting is by Artemesia or a copy of her work.'

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